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CalFed plan unveiled to solve state water supply [excerpts]

By Vic Pollard, Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO - With a Kern County grower delivering an old-fashioned cheer for Gov. Gray Davis, state and federal officials Friday announced a proposed framework for beginning to solve California's major water problems over the next 30 years.

...Although the pep-rally atmosphere masked serious misgivings about the future of the plan, most officials and interest groups Friday focused on points of agreement in what is known as the CalFed plan, developed by a consortium of state and federal agencies that have jurisdiction over various parts of the state's water system.

In ceremonies on the Capitol steps, Fred Starrh, board president of the Kern County Water Agency, spoke as a representative of agricultural water agencies, one of the key interest groups affected by the agreement.

Starrh recalled attending a 1993 meeting in Washington, D.C., that helped launch negotiations which produced Friday's plan. He said then-U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley, D-N.J., expressed his confidence in Babbitt with the cheer, "Babbitt, Babbitt, he's our man. If he can't do it, nobody can."

"And now," Starrh continued, "we have another player that we're all counting on from our perspective as agriculturalists, and that's Gov. Davis. And our cheer is: Davis, Davis, he's our man. If he can't do it, no one can."

The salute from the Republican farmer to the Democratic governor drew a cheer from the bipartisan audience. But it was a none-too-subtle reminder that the agriculture industry has growing faith that the moderate governor can be a major ally in protecting them from what they fear could be overly strict regulatory actions by federal environmental agencies under the plan.

Urban water agencies have similar concerns.

On the other hand, environmentalists worry that the plan promises too much in the way of continued subsidies and assistance to agriculture and industry and too little protection for endangered fish and other wildlife.

These are among the issues that remain as the government agencies and interest groups begin the final round of negotiations on the plan that is expected to be completed in late summer with what is known as a record of decision.

...The program is expected to increase water supplies to Kern County and other areas of the state with such steps as raising the height of at least two major dams and increasing the amount of water pumped from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

...From agriculture's perspective, a key issue in the final negotiations involves promises that once the CalFed program is in place, federal and state environmental agencies will not require farmers to give up any more water to protect endangered fish in the Delta.

Growing anger among farmers over repeated reductions in deliveries by state and federal water projects because of new listings of species under the Endangered Species Act in the late 1980s and early 1990s were a major factor leading to the start of the CalFed program.

David Hayes, Babbitt's deputy secretary, said in an interview that federal agencies are in a position to make a "very strong commitment" to require no new reductions in water supplies. That's because they believe they will have enough water to provide all the protection the fish need in all but drought years.

One key to that, he said, is a proposed new environmental water account, an annual supply of some 380,000 acre-feet of water that will be purchased by the federal government to provide freshwater flows when and where they're needed for fish protection.

Officials also hope to blunt the effect of droughts with a new water bank, an emergency supply of water that could be tapped in dry years, that would be developed by a special governor's task force by the end of this year.

Agricultural water officials say they like the idea of the environmental water account and want to trust the government, but they're not 100 percent convinced.

Richard Moss, manager of the Friant Water Users Authority, noted that the promise depends on the government finding 380,000 acre-feet of water that it can buy from willing sellers.

"I don't think there's that much water sloshing around," Moss said.

Starrh said most farmers share Moss' concern, but he and many others are increasingly convinced that Davis will go to bat for them in any conflicts over the issue.